

Guts – but no glory

GLIDER PILOTS ARE PAID THEIR DUE IN NEW DOCUMENTARY

BY JEAN REED

Walter Cronkite says, "If you have to go into combat, don't go by glider. Walk, crawl, parachute, swim – anything. But don't go by glider. I did it once and have an unstinting admiration for those who did it more than once."

Len Gumley, better known as one of the founders of Sarasota Arts Day, is a WWII glider pilot who has been there and done that. Two stateside glider crashes kept him out of overseas combat, but he knows the glider story, every verse, every chapter of this horrific governmental goof-up that cost the lives of 600 young men, and has remained hidden and unheralded until now.

A documentary filmmaker, Len rounded up the raw combat film, located the old pilots still alive and determined that they "are not going to die with nobody ever knowing what they did."

It has taken him 10 years, but the documentary film, a part of the "Suicide Missions" series, titled, "Silent Wings Warriors," is now complete. It will be shown over the History Channel (Cable 48 Sarasota), Jan. 3, 9 p.m. Don't worry if you can't figure out how to program your VCR while you watch football; History Channel often repeats, or you can buy a copy.

Len (known as "Blackie" when he was a glider pilot) joined the glider program in July 1941. The program was brand new, looked glamorous and required only six weeks training if, like Len, you already had a power pilot's license. He said, "sign me up."

Happily, he adds, "We didn't know what was going on." What was going on was there were no gliders, no instructors, no program.

"Every single pilot was a volunteer. Qualifications were not as stringent as for power planes. Guys too old for the draft, married with kids, thought they'd be flying in six weeks. A year later they were still on the ground

"They lost 125 in training yet nobody asked to get out of the program. We were all idiots. We didn't know how bad it was. When we graduated and got those big silver wings with a 'G' in the middle, we always loved to say 'G' is for guts."

A death wish? Nope. "We had a scrappy desire to live, but on the edge." Asked if they thought they were accomplishing anything, Len replied, "Oh sure, in a couple of places we did. We went into Germany, Sicily and conquered a couple of fields. The irony is

that I think the whole mission would have been accomplished whether there were gliders or not. In that sense how much we contributed, I don't know."

A compact bundle of energy and enthusiasm, gravelly-voiced Len Gumley feels deeply about these men. "Everybody knows about the Battle of the Bulge..." His voice catches and he stops, embarrassed by the welling tears. "Nobody knows they asked for volunteers to fly two gliders in to help those guys. Twenty volunteered, four were picked. Two gliders, one with nothing but gasoline, the other one with medics. They were successful, and nobody knows about it."

In the film, a pilot points out that all it took was a well-aimed single gunshot to bring down the fragile gliders. The pilot bringing a load of gasoline into the fiery Battle of the Bulge, as well as the load of desperately needed medics, was a raw act of courage. "Failure was not an option."

PREMISE OF THE PROGRAM

The premise of the glider program, Len explains, was a good one. "The helicopter today does what a glider did. Comes down and lands. The difference is it can get the hell back outta there." A sizeable difference.

Paratroopers landed with only a single weapon. Gliders had the capacity for two pilots and 15 armed men. Or a different mix of a jeep, five men and a Howitzer – load determined by weight.

"Glider pilots were trained in weaponry more than any person in the military because we had to be trained to use every weapon that could be carried in the glider." They were paratroopers in a sense, with bigger, better artillery. At least on paper.

"Just before D-Day in Normandy, the Air Force sent over reconnaissance aircraft to take pictures of the open fields of Normandy." In the intervening weeks, the Germans put telephone poles in those fields and RR ties. According to the film, some of the poles were even mined. The gliders were caught in this diabolical trap. We were just sitting ducks."

The tow pilots were not to release the gliders until signalled by the glider pilot. Some of the tow pilots panicked when caught in deadly crossfire and cut the glider loose. "If it's between my neck and yours, Charlie, you've had it..."

On paper each glider was to have two trained pilots sitting side by side in the pilot



Len Gumley on the field in his pilot's uniform.

seats. The film shows a glider pilot telling about finding an untrained infantryman in the co-pilot seat. "I told him if anything happens to me, we've got five minutes for me to instruct you on how to land a glider. I might as well have told him to go shoot himself."

REALITY

Hitler cancelled his glider program, uncharacteristically concerned about the casualties.

The Allied Glider Program, though often almost comical in its inadequacy, lack of supervision and follow-up, survived. Len thinks it was because nobody was paying attention.

"There was a war on. Everything started up so fast after Pearl Harbor, there was no time to investigate or look into anything." Glider pilots were killed in defective gliders made by any company that answered the call. One formerly made caskets. Thus gliders became known as "Flying Caskets."

How about a commander? "Every time we had a commander he got killed in a glider. Would have been almost funny if it weren't so goddamned tragic," Len commented.

Glider pilots were so unpredictable as to what part would fall off and when, it was decided to hire a stunt flyer to take up a group of VIPs to impress the populace on the reliabil-

ity of the aircraft. It crashed and all died.

Some glider pilots finally found out what they had been fighting for. As a fella says in the film. "In Holland, a pilot met a Dutchman with his little daughter he had kept in the cellar for four years until it was all over. He cried and I cried."

Len, who loves to don his pilot cap and windbreaker with the wings and "G" for guts, refuses to have his glider buddies compared to the suicidal Japanese Kamikaze Corps.

"They went in and knew they were going to die. We were cocky 23, 24-year-olds who said the other guy dies, not me. More guys came back than went. Still, most of the pilots who survived will say today, 'If I had known what was going on, you couldn't have gotten me into one of those things.'"

Most would not exchange the hell-raising experiences, however. "We were always boozing, picking up girls, and sneaking off to town. The story goes that the general at the base called Washington, saying 'you gotta get these guys outta here. They don't salute; they raise hell. They're ruining the reputation of the Air Force.'"

Len says we'll all get a chance to check out these tales with the glider pilots who will be guests of honor at the showing of the film at the Sarasota Film Festival Jan 15 or 16.